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ABSTRACT

This Digest examines the key issues surrounding the implementation of schoolwide reform. It discusses how whole-school reform results can be dramatic but that schools must take special care with implementing the reforms. It examines the importance of outside assistance in reform efforts and reports that design teams are typically used by schools contemplating reform. Such teams can integrate reform efforts into one comprehensive effort, rather than trying to implement fragments. However, in choosing a school-reform model, the most important first step is a thorough self-study; once a school's strengths and weaknesses are accounted for, the model has a much greater chance of success. After a model is chosen, the school must set clear goals for student outcomes and must be sure to have open communication between the design team and the school. The next biggest challenge that reform-minded schools face is that of funding. Federal funding is available, but it does not cover all costs, and it is recommended that states and districts create an investment fund that draws on public and private sources to support the implementation of reform models. Finally, other factors that affect implementation--strong leadership, teacher commitment, and a supportive student body--are discussed. (Contains 10 references.) (RJM)

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Implementing Whole-School Reform

by Elizabeth Hertling

Comprehensive reform, whole-school reform, schoolwide change—no matter what name is used to refer to it, this reform movement seeks to improve school performance by simultaneously aligning all aspects of a school's environment with a central, guiding vision. Increasingly, states and districts around the country are jumping on the comprehensive reform bandwagon, especially with the incentive of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program, which makes $150 million in federal funds available to schools.

This Digest examines some of the key issues surrounding the implementation of schoolwide reform and the factors that can lead to failure or success.

How Successful Have Schools Been in Implementing Whole-School Reform?

These schoolwide programs can produce compelling results such as substantial gains in student achievement. However, there is a catch. The designs must be well implemented, and that is where many schools and districts have run into problems.

In 1998, the RAND Corporation released a study of schools that were implementing whole-school designs. Two years after adopting the designs, only about half of the schools were implementing the core elements of the programs schoolwide, and 45 percent were below that level (Glennan, Jr. 1998).

How Important Is Outside Assistance?

Because comprehensive reform encompasses so many complex aspects of school organization, a school typically seeks assistance from an outside organization. The school works with a design team to implement the specific model it has chosen. The design team is therefore crucial to the success of implementation, often providing resources and support to the school for up to three years.

The support that design teams provide varies from model to model. Some design teams are more prescriptive, providing a specific set of standards for curriculum and assessment. Others work with the schools to help them create their own standards (New American Schools 1998). Some work with staff for up to a year before beginning implementation; others dive right in (Glennan, Jr. 1998).

New American Schools (NAS), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that assists and supports schools through the implementation of comprehensive school designs, cites many benefits that result from the use of design teams to facilitate reform. For one, design teams integrate reform efforts into one comprehensive effort, rather than trying to implement fragments. Design teams also focus on results and recommend actions based on research and development that would be difficult for most local education agencies to duplicate. This can save schools the time and effort of having to invent their own models of reform. Perhaps most importantly, design teams provide a strong vision to schools that can sustain them through the long process of implementation (NAS).

How Should Schools Choose an Effective Design?

In a guide to choosing comprehensive school reform models, the Educational Research Service (1998) says the school's first, and most essential, step is to conduct a thorough self-study. If the school carefully and realistically identifies its strengths and weaknesses, as well as what staff expects from a design, its chance of successfully implementing reform is much greater. ERS suggests asking such questions as "How does this design fit with the school's vision and goals? What sort of professional development does the design team provide? Is the school prepared to make changes in school governance?"

Others agree that if schools take their time in choosing a design, they will be more likely to experience success. "Schools must latch on to a model wholeheartedly, then have time and support to make it work," says John Anderson, president of NAS (1998).

Schools should choose a design of their own free will, adds Susan Bodilly, a senior social scientist at RAND: "If a design is forced upon a school, you have a high probability that it will not go forward" (Olson 1999). Others express caution that schools should be provided with some guidelines to prevent them from making the wrong decision about a model (Olson).

Once schools have assessed their needs, how can they determine whether a design will improve student achievement? ERS says that effective programs will set clear goals, as well as provide a means to assess students' progress toward those goals.

A RAND study found that clear communication between the design team and the school is essential for

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EA 029 917

implementation, support, and teacher perception of the design (Berends and colleagues 1998). Bodilly says that designs that provide more prescriptive guidelines tend to have a smoother implementation because they require less time and expertise on the part of teachers (Olson 1999).

What Problems Can Funding Pose?

In many cases, funding presents a significant impediment to the implementation of a design. Lack of funding can lead to loss of crucial staff, discourage reformers, and ultimately kill the reform (ERS).

Federal funding from the CSRD program provides grants of up to $50,000 to each school seeking to implement comprehensive reform. CSRD funds, however, are only a small portion of what is needed to successfully implement whole-school reform. While the $50,000 grant may cover costs associated with products and services provided by an external developer, schools must also fund the additional costs of providing time for teachers' professional development, new technology, and travel. First-year costs differ greatly from program to program, but can range anywhere from $98,000 for ATLAS Communities to as high as $588,000 for Co-NECT (American Institutes for Research, 1999).

The Education Commission of the States (1998) recommends that states and districts participating in comprehensive school reform create an investment fund that draws on public and private sources to support the implementation of reform models. Districts can reduce costs of schoolwide reform by using current staff members as facilitators instead of hiring additional personnel (American Institutes for Research). When clusters of schools in the same district implement comprehensive school reform, some developers provide services at a lower per-school cost (Education Commission of the States). Anderson argues that because a schoolwide design focuses a school's work, educators have more time to reallocate existing resources to fund implementation.

For some schools, the acquisition of funding is not the only problem—deciding just how to allocate that money can be a stumbling block. For instance, school management teams consisting of parents and educators may struggle to create schoolwide budgets with little or no experience to draw upon (ERS).

What Other Factors Affect Implementation?

Strong leadership is crucial to the implementation of schoolwide reform (Olson). Schaffer and colleagues (1997) point out that in many schools where reform failed, principals did not keep the staff aligned to the goals of the design. As well, many principals were not knowledgeable about basic precepts of the reform program, and therefore could not provide good leadership.

Teacher commitment to the reform is crucial in sustaining implementation. "We're implementing so many new things at once. It's a lot to ask teachers to digest," says one New Jersey teacher (Hendrie 1999). Teachers may feel threatened by change or view the reform as a fad that will not last; in that case, they won't commit their energy to the reform (Schaffer and colleagues). Teachers should be assured that reform will provide an opportunity to develop professionally and should also be allowed to "transfer with dignity" if they do not agree to participate in the reform (ERS).

Students may resist comprehensive reform as well, especially in the case of designs that change curriculum drastically. "They don't want to change. We have spoon-fed them for so long," says one fourth-grade teacher of her students (Hendrie). School leaders can garner support for reform by communicating clearly with students, parents, and community members.

Another problem, RAND researchers found, is that many principals and teachers do not feel that they have the authority to reallocate resources or make the significant changes in school operations that are needed to implement designs. Clearly, the district's support is important. In addition, the designs must align sufficiently with districts' accountability systems so that teachers do not feel they must deviate from the designs to satisfy state standards (Glennan, Jr.).

In time, more schools will gain experience with whole-school reform, and researchers will investigate in greater detail the factors that contribute to its success. Then we will know whether these designs have become just another program that is turned on and off when convenient or whether they truly can transform schools comprehensively.

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